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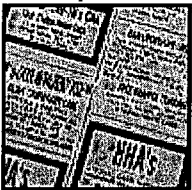
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Front Page

Lead contamination stalls boardwalk plan

Resident says area should be left in its natural state anyway

BY JESSICA SMITH
Staff Writer

Plans to build a boardwalk in the Cliffwood Beach section of Old Bridge have been put on hold because of lead found in the Margaret's Creek area.

The boardwalk, which is the subject of concerns from local residents and a local utility agency, will wait until the state Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) has concluded its testing in the proposed area where the lead was found.

"It may not affect any future expansion ..., but all of those plans are being put on hold until the DEP completes their analysis," Mayor Jim Phillips said.

The boardwalk connecting Laurence Harbor to Whale Creek would represent phase three of the Middlesex County beachfront project. The first phase consisted of a walkway from Cheesequake Creek to Margaret's Creek, with sections of boardwalk and blacktop. It also included fishing piers, a refreshment stand, bathroom facilities, a maintenance building, and a police substation, according to Phillips.

"That was a very expansive and expensive phase," Phillips, a vocal advocate of the project, said.

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Phase two involved the construction of a park, called Pirate's Cove, near the Monmouth County border in Cliffwood Beach. Along with playground areas, it would consist of an observation deck and a ramp for launching kayaks.

The Middlesex County Board of Freeholders has spent \$5.5 million in open space funds on the first two phases, according to Ralph Albanir, county director of parks and recreation. The funding was supplemented by a \$1.5 million grant from the state Green Acres Program.

Although the county is funding the project, Albanir pointed out that it is only leasing the land from Old Bridge.

"One thing to keep in mind here is that the property that the boardwalk would be placed on is owned by the township of Old Bridge," Albanir said. "For that reason, Old Bridge Township is taking the lead with the problem that has been uncovered by the DEP."

Freeholder Director David B. Crabiel said he will address the issue at the freeholders' Aug. 16 meeting.

"We don't have DEP approval at this point, and I don't see us getting DEP approval any time in the immediate future," Crabiel said.

In April, a high amount of lead material was found in the ground along Margaret's Creek in the town's Laurence Harbor section. In July, the DEP found lead ingots in the seawall at the Laurence Harbor beachfront along Bayview Drive. Though both areas have been fenced off with signs warning the public to keep away, the DEP is concerned that other areas could be contaminated.

Larry Hajna, a DEP spokesman, said some lead was found in the sand on the beach in the immediate vicinity of the contaminated seawall.

"There could have been some transport by the

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water to the sand from the seawall," Hajna said.

Additional sampling in the area of the seawall and beach is scheduled for this week, according to Hajna.

These areas were filled in with construction debris sometime in the 1960s and 1970s. Though environmental laws were more lax in those times, Phillips said the DEP has been able to identify three companies who played roles in contaminating the creek: NL [formerly National Lead] Industries, Twin Anchors Marine Basin and Liberty Trucking Co.

In a directive and notice to insurers addressed to the three companies, Ronald Corcoran, assistant director of the DEP's oversight resources allocation element, informed them that they will be held responsible for all costs associated with the testing, cleanup and removal of the lead under the N.J. Spill Compensation and Control Act.

Contamination is not the only issue being raised regarding the boardwalk plans.

Arthur Haney, executive director of the Old Bridge Municipal Utilities Authority (OBMUA), which has a pumping station in that area along the beach, said he has other environmental concerns. The OBMUA would like to have a bulkhead built in order to protect a dune that stands behind the pumping station.

"Our issue has more to do with the erosion," Haney said.

The OBMUA requested that the county put a walkway leading from the bulkhead to the boardwalk, Haney said. That would help to keep beachgoers away from its trucks and equipment, he said.

"The next phase of this project was never intended to go past the OBMUA," Phillips said.

Nearby residents have also voiced opposition to the project, saying it will wreak havoc on their peaceful, waterfront neighborhood.

"I'm sure the mayor wouldn't want this in his backyard," resident Judy Moscaritolo said. "[The beach] is loaded with broken glass, cans and tons of drug paraphernalia. What is that going to do to people's property values? It's going to look like the boardwalk was put up on a garbage dump."

Moscaritolo said the boardwalk would attract teens from Middlesex and Monmouth counties who would disturb the peace and privacy of the area.

"We've got a major drug element," Moscaritolo said. "I don't want this drug element in my backyard."

A lack of police surveillance, along with problems with litter, would only become exacerbated with the construction of the boardwalk, according to Moscaritolo. She said the beach should stay as it is - mainly a place for families and fishing.

Phillips said the beach was recently cleaned and township police regularly patrol there. According to Albanir, the county would be responsible for maintaining the project after construction, while Old Bridge would be responsible for patrolling the area.

The beach near Moscaritolo's home suffers from excessive erosion, she said, and no sand replenishment has taken place to combat the problem. The erosion, she said, is the biggest problem with the boardwalk plans.

"There is not going to be any beach for him to put phase three on," Moscaritolo said. "Without the land, they can't build."

Albanir said the boardwalk would be built on piles, taking the erosion issue into account.

"Erosion has been a problem on the Old Bridge waterfront," Albanir said. "There is no

question that a sand-replenishment program would help it along. That type of work is done by the federal government and the state."

Moscaritolo also said the beach serves as a nesting place for egrets, which she fears will be threatened by the construction of a boardwalk.

"This is just such a natural beach, I'd hate to see it unnatural, and for Mother Nature to have to find another home."

Phillips agreed about the beauty of the beach, but said he sees the issue in a different light.

He said he would like to see the beach go back to its heyday, before hurricanes washed out the numerous bungalows along the shore, and the creation of the Garden State Parkway lured residents to destinations south of Old Bridge. Phillips grew up along the beach there, and noted that it was once home to the world's largest salt water pool, and in his mother's day, it housed casinos and amusement rides.

"I have always been for connecting the boardwalk," Phillips said. "It's been a dream of mine to restore the beach in Old Bridge. It's kind of like buried treasure. For those who have found it, they really enjoy it. I just think everyone should have that opportunity."